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**Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*:  
American Blackness and White Privilege Through the Lenses of the  
African Diasporic Experience**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Through their novels *Americanah* and *Homegoing*, writers Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Yaa Gyasi address different experiences of migration from Nigeria and Ghana to the United States of America. Their characters provide unique perspectives on the workings of racial dynamics in the U.S., the tensions and different histories of different African diasporas, and the prevalence of white privilege within American society. This paper aims to produce an analysis of how both novels expand the meanings of blackness in the U.S. and serve as outsider perspectives on racial inequality.

Keywords: *Americanah*, *Homegoing*, African diaspora, Blackness, White fragility, whiteness studies.

## **RESUMEN**

En sus novelas *Americanah* y *Homegoing*, las escritoras Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie y Yaa Gyasi abordan diferentes experiencias migratorias desde Nigeria y Ghana a Estados Unidos. Sus personajes ofrecen perspectivas únicas sobre el funcionamiento de las dinámicas raciales en Estados Unidos, las tensiones y diferencias históricas entre las distintas diásporas africanas, y la prevalencia del privilegio blanco en la sociedad americana. El objetivo de este trabajo es producir un análisis de la forma en la que las dos novelas expanden los significados de la ‘negritud’ en Estados Unidos y proporcionan perspectivas externas sobre la desigualdad racial en el país.

Palabras clave: *Americanah*, *Homegoing*, diáspora africana, negritud, fragilidad blanca.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Thesis and Methodology

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Yaa Gyasi belong to a new generation of African writers, generally categorized within the growing genre of diasporic literature. The term ‘diaspora’ “typically refers to a collective living outside its homeland, a displaced population” (Felder, 2019, p. 14). *Homegoing* and *Americanah* share the portrayal of the experience of a relatively new African diaspora beginning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one which is marked by an attempt to “share in the global economic prosperity” (Feldner, 2019, p. 15) and that is distinguished by “the possibility of return” (Feldner, 2019, p. 16). This possibility of return and the voluntary nature of the ‘new’ African diaspora establish its difference from the diasporic experience of African Americans, which is marked by slavery and violence, and addressed to different extents in both novels.

Through the experience of the ‘outsider within’ that is the African immigrant, *Homegoing* and *Americanah* explore the workings of racial identity in the U.S. Both novels represent the interpellation of the subject and the imposition of “blackness” as their most salient perceived identity, the tension between African immigrants and African Americans, and the encounter with white fragility. This paper aims to analyze the two novels’ portrayals of these issues through the application of theoretical tools such as postcolonial theory, Althusser’s concept of “interpellation”, and theory from the field of whiteness studies.

As the author of this project, I am a white middle-class European woman. Because of my subject positioning, I am aware of my possible bias, and have tried to be as honest as possible to the experiences as portrayed by the authors of the novels and to the theory written by black authors. It is also why I have found it fitting to include a section on whiteness criticism and white privilege within the analysis of the two novels.

## 1.2. Context of the novels

### 1.2.1. *Americanah*

*Americanah* was published in 2013 and it was written by famous Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The author is most known to the mainstream public because of her Ted Talks, both of which have over six million views in YouTube: “We Should All be Feminists”, which breaks down the importance of feminism, and “The Danger of a Single Story”, which explains the importance of representation and diversity in the media we

consume. She was further established as a famous figure when Beyoncé included a fragment of Adichie's Ted Talk in the videoclip of her song "Flawless".

The novel focuses on the story of Ifemelu, a young Nigerian woman who migrates to the United States. Given that her story reflects Adichie's, who also migrated to the States, the novel is considered to be semi-autobiographical or at the very least partially based on her own experience. In the U.S., Ifemelu writes a blog about American racial dynamics which eventually lands her a job at Princeton university, which is where she is at the beginning of the novel. The reader learns at the start that after over a decade living in the States, she yearns for her home country, Nigeria. As she gets her hair done by other African women in a hair salon, she reflects back on her life in Nigeria and in the U.S.; eventually making the decision to return to her home-country.

Apart from theory, this project draws from other analyses of Adichie's novel. Plenty of scholarly articles have been published on *Americanah*, addressing issues of race, gender, migration, the African diaspora, aesthetic, and desire, among others.

### **1.2.2. *Homegoing***

Yaa Gyasi's novel *Homegoing* is concerned with African migration to the U.S. as well, but it also explicitly addresses the long history embedded in such migration. The novel, published in 2016, portrays the history of two branches of an African family through a glimpse at the life of each generation on both sides from the late 1700's in colonial Ghana to the present United States. Two sisters are raised in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by different families and tribes and experience strikingly different fates: Effia marries a slave trader and Esi is captured, forced into slavery, and shipped off to North America. Whilst Effia's descendants will find their way to a relatively comfortable middle class, Esi's will endure slavery, escape it, return to it, become free only to be enslaved by the prison system, and suffer police violence and systemic poverty and racism. The two branches are reunited at the end: Marjorie is Effia's descendant, and her parents migrated to the U.S. when she was little, where she has grown up; Marcus is Esi's descendant, an African American. Unaware of their genealogical connections, they meet and help each other heal.

Yaa Gyasi published this novel when she was only 26 years old, and it received several awards, such as the National Book Critic's Circle John Leonard Prize. The novel was also selected for the National Book Foundation's "5 under 35", and it established her as a very



promising young writer. Like her character Marjorie, Gyasi's family migrated from Ghana to the U.S. when she was young.

Although *Homegoing* is rich with commentary on racial identity, African and African American identity, and migration and diaspora, there is hardly any available scholarly writing on it. Therefore, this project aims to further bring the novel into the conversation by reading it against *Americanah* and showing the wide range of possibilities the novel has to offer in the fields of race and postcolonial criticism.

## 2. BLACKNESS AS MASTER STATUS

### 2.1. Interpellation, the Performance of Blackness, and the ‘outsider within’

In his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, published in the collection of essays *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, French philosopher Louis Althusser proposes that power dynamics are sustained through Regressive (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) (2001, pp. 85-126). While the first refer to those which function by violence and force such as the police or the prison system, the latter are those which function via ideology, through structures such as religion, education, family, culture, press, etc. His central thesis is that “ideology interpellates individuals as subjects” (Althusser, 2001, p. 115), and it is through this ‘interpellation’ that ideology sustains itself, and therefore the material realities that such ideology perpetuates. Whilst Althusser is applying his analysis to class dynamics and the reproduction of the conditions of production under capitalism, his theory of ‘interpellation’ can easily be applied to racial identity and its portrayal in *Americanah* and *Homegoing*, and doing so sheds a light on the racial experiences that both Ifemelu and Marjorie experience in the U.S. Althusser’s claim that every single individual who is part of the system “must in one way or another be ‘steeped’ in this ideology in order to perform their tasks” (2001, p. 89) is comparable to the cultural performance of gender and race, and the two novels portray how Ifemelu’s and Marjorie’s contexts attempt to assimilate them into the ideology of American racial hierarchy.

Althusser claims that it is through this ‘interpellation’ of individuals that ideology “transforms the individuals into subjects” (2001, p. 118). In other words, it is through being addressed and treated as a subject that individuals’ subjectivities are created. If applied to racial dynamics, while racism works in a material and systematic way, black and white identities *per se* exist because individuals are interpellated as black or white. The characters of *Americanah* and *Homegoing* encounter this interpellation when they migrate to the United States. Being from African countries, Ifemelu and Marjorie do not think of themselves as black in the same ways that African Americans do, or that white Americans expect them to. Nonetheless, race is imposed on them once they reach the U.S., and they are forced to come to terms with the fact that it does not matter whether they see themselves as black or not, the fact that society sees them through those lenses and addresses them as such means that they *are* black. This experience resonates with what Frantz Fanon describes in “The Fact of Blackness”, a chapter included in his book *Black Skins, White Masks*: “I did not create a meaning for myself; the meaning was already there, waiting” (2008, p. 113). Althusser describes ‘interpellation’ or

‘hailing’ as a phenomenon that “can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’” (2001, p. 118). Likewise, Fanon’s writing reflects being interpellated by the white gaze – “Look! A Negro!” (2001, p. 89) – and through that process “[he is] *fixed*” (p. 95) into a pre-existing idea or identity. Like Fanon, Ifemelu and Marjorie find themselves being given a categorical, pre-existing meaning that has nothing to do with them as people or with their self-perception and ethnicities but with the racial dynamics of the society they are entering, and that is imposed through ‘interpellation’.

In the case of Adichie’s novel, her protagonist is very self-aware of this process, and in a dinner with white and black American liberals, she bluntly states: “I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America” (2013, p. 290). Ifemelu makes the point that blackness is not an essential identity for her, but something she ‘became’, a fixed identity that was imposed on her when she entered the country. Thus, her black identity is tied to the context she finds herself in, that is, to the ideology that surrounds and interpellates her. She also makes it very clear that racial identity is supposed to be performed, and that its performance can be learned. In her blog post “To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby” she addresses fellow African Immigrants to the U.S. and explains to them what becoming black means, and what they need to learn in order to *perform* Blackness, such as what they should be offended by, how to do the “black nod”, or how to behave around white people (Adichie, 2013, pp. 220-221). She even takes into account the differences between female and male blackness, advising black women to not speak their minds as they would in their home countries, because “in America, strong-minded black women are SCARY”, and telling black men to “be hyper-mellow” in order to not be perceived as a threat and have a gun pulled on them (p. 221). According to scholar Aretha Phiri, entries such as this one show that “Ifemelu’s blog persistently problematizes the generalized notion of black authenticity. In particular, the black race is here presented as a social construction that is learned and into which Africans are ((un)wittingly) initiated” (2017, p. 133). Furthermore, the novel’s portrayal of being interpellated into the performance of a particular notion of black subjectivity also resonates with Homi K. Bhabha’s claim that “the demand of identification” entails “the production of an image of identity and transformation of the subject in assuming that image” (2004, p. 64).

Thus, Adichie’s novel clearly emphasizes Blackness as a non-essential, culturally and geographically dependent category, built on racial ideology. In the words of Mindi McMann, Ifemelu’s experience shows that “race is not inherent but is a cultural, and therefore, learned

identity” (2018, p. 201). The societal imposition of identifying as black and performing Blackness in American culture is also portrayed in *Homegoing*. As Marjorie struggles to reconcile her Ghanaian ethnic identity with her American life as a black woman, her African American teacher asks her to write a poem about “what being African American means to [her]”, to which Marjorie responds: “But I’m not African American” (Gyasi, 2016, p. 273). Her response indicates a reluctance to being classified as an American black, and to have her blackness be her most salient identity, as it is for African Americans. However, her teacher advises her the following: “Here, in this country, it doesn’t matter where you came from first to the white people running things. You’re here now, and here black is black is black.” (2016, p. 273). Thus, here blackness is once again imposed on the African immigrant, showing how when they arrive to the United States, African Immigrants “must deal with Blackness as a master status, or as their most salient identity” (Landry, 2018, p. 127). That is, independently of their self-perception or of how they choose to self-identify, the world will interpellate them as ‘Black’ regardless. Ava Landry explains Marjorie’s reluctance to “rely on Blackness as such a salient source of social identity” by paraphrasing Frantz Fanon: “the construction of Blackness as an all-consuming category hinders black people’s autonomy to create a subjective sense of self” (Landry, 2018, p. 134). Furthermore, the assumption of solidarity along racial lines is undermined when Marjorie is ostracized and mocked by the other black (African American) girls in her high school because she “sound[s] like a white girl” (Gyasi, 2016, p. 269). That is, she does not perform American blackness by reproducing the forms of speech associated with African American communities, and maintains her Ghanaian accent instead. While Marjorie has no choice but to accept that her blackness is in the U.S. her most salient identity, her refusal to perform American notions of blackness leads to her becoming an outsider among African Americans as well. The fact that this incident takes place in school shows that, as Althusser claimed, educational institutions work as Ideological State Apparatuses, where subjects are socialized into the dominant ideology. In this case, Marjorie is being socially punished for not submitting to American racial ideology by refusing to perform American notions of blackness. Both for Ifemelu and for Marjorie, this dynamic of interpellation and social punishment in order to extort the performance and identification of blackness shows that “their ‘blackness’ is not universal, but instead is historically situated and

culturally constructed, something always imposed on them by external forces” (McMann, 2018, p. 200)<sup>1</sup>.

Although ‘interpellation’ affects every single individual in a society, the fact that Ifemelu and Marjorie have not been raised in American racial ideology since birth, and it is instead forced onto them at an older age, makes visible a process that goes otherwise unnoticed. While their experiences in the U.S. are a visible portrayal of how subjects are interpellated by others into racial performance in both private and public domains, their singular subject positions as ‘outsiders’ also grant them a unique perspective on what race means in the United States. This unique perspective manifests most explicitly in *Americanah* through Ifemelu’s blog, in which she explains the American racial hierarchy to other ‘Non-American Blacks’. Her tone is sharp and humorous, and portrays how American racism looks to a black outsider. Shan, an African American writer and sister of Ifemelu’s boyfriend Blaine, points out how Ifemelu’s subject position allows her to write her blog: she claims that Ifemelu can write her blog “Because she’s African. She’s writing from the outside” (Adichie, 2013, p. 336). Similarly, Marjorie’s outsider status makes her hyperaware of racial dynamics, as she also has to learn that blackness means a lot more than skin color in the U.S., and has her life in Ghana to compare her experience to. For instance, her understanding of racial performance in the U.S., which forces her to learn that being ‘white’ or ‘black’ can be describers of speech patterns or behavior rather than skin color (“she was made aware, yet again, that here ‘white’ could be the way a person talked; ‘black’, the music a person listened to” (269)), is possible because those are not natural givens for her. She contrasts American understandings of race with her experience in Ghana, where “you could only be what you were, what your skin announced to the world” (268). Thus, it is the fact that she comes from a place where skin color is not culturally and socially charged in the same ways as it is in the U.S. that allows her to see the strangeness or un-neutrality of American perceptions of race. In these terms, Ifemelu’s and Marjorie’s experiences can be better understood through the theories of Althusser and Patricia Hill Collins. Althusser contended that “those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside of ideology”, and that “it is necessary to be outside ideology” in order to be able to perceive that it exists and what it consists of (2001, p. 118). In this sense, Marjorie’s and Ifemelu’s perspectives shed such an interesting light on how race dynamics work in the U.S. because they are outsiders, they come from outside American ideology and therefore do

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<sup>1</sup> While Mindi McMann’s quote refers to the main characters of Adichie’s *Americanah* and Andrea Levy’s *Small Island*, her statement applies to Marjorie’s experience in *Homegoing* as well.

not see it as neutral. The role of their ‘outsider-ness’ in their ability to deconstruct and represent American racial dynamics is better understood by reading them through the theoretical tool of the ‘outsider within’, coined by feminist African American scholar Patricia Hill Collins. Collins uses the term to refer to the ways in which “Black female intellectuals have made creative use of their marginality” (1986, p. S14). African American women exist within American society, yet they are placed at the very end of the margins in terms of racial and gender hierarchy; they are othered in ways that black men and white women are not. Thus, they have “the ability of the ‘stranger’ to see patterns that may be more difficult for those immersed in the situation to see” (Collins, 1986, S15). While Collins’ point is to emphasize the value of thought produced by African American women, scholar Shane A. McCoy applies the ‘outsider within’ as an analytic tool in his analysis of *Americanah*, in order to shed a light on how the ‘new’ African diaspora complicates an “assumed racial solidarity and blackness as a monolithic category” (2017, p. 281). As an African Immigrant, Ifemelu is an ‘outsider within’, albeit not exactly as Collins argues African American women to be: she does not exist in the margins of American society, rather she existed outside of it and was then introduced and fitted into the margins. This ‘outsider-ness’ provides her with a special standpoint, which is also present in Marjorie’s experience in *Homegoing*, causing both characters to have unique perspectives of racial dynamics in the U.S.

## **2.2. African Immigrants and African Americans**

In his essay “The Newly Black Americans: African Immigrants and Black America”, scholar Louis Chude-Sokei explains the tensions between African Immigrants and African Americans and refers to them as the New Diaspora versus the Old Diaspora; their main difference being the voluntary nature of the first, and the involuntary nature of the latter. In his words, “the issue of the ‘voluntary’ will prove to be a decisive factor in both political orientation and patterns of social response” because “those who have chosen to come [to the U.S.] [...] will see America far differently than those whose very being is shaped by an involuntary presence” (2014, p. 59). The tension and differences between the two diasporas inevitably lead to an expansion of what ‘blackness’ means in the American imagination, because the arrival of voluntary African migrants complicates “the experience of Blackness in the United States” beyond that of a collective linked by the history of slavery (Landry, 2018, p. 127).

Both *Americanah* and *Homegoing* portray the experience of African immigrants in the United States, where they are socially categorized as ‘black’ regardless of their pre-migration ethnic identity. Their experience and identity are set in contrast with those of African Americans, with whom they are expected to identify, and their outsider perspective reveals the workings of racial dynamics in U.S. contemporary society. *Americanah* does not engage with the issue as directly as *Homegoing* does, and eventually turns away from American racial hierarchy as Ifemelu returns to her home country. Conversely, *Homegoing* is built explicitly around this historical tension, and the novel’s ending points to a healing conciliation between African immigrants and African Americans through the friendship of Marjorie and Marcus. While Ifemelu’s attempt at having a relationship with an African American fails, Marjorie and Marcus’ friendship proves healing.

In the case of *Americanah*, understanding this tension through Chude-Sokei’s terms sheds a light on the fundamental problem in Ifemelu’s romantic relationship with Blaine, an African American. Blaine is an academic who is passionate about African American activism, and expects Ifemelu to be as invested in the cause as he is, which makes her uncomfortable. For example, in one occasion in which a white woman asks if she could touch Ifemelu’s hair and Ifemelu says yes, she “sensed Blaine tense, saw the pulsing at his temples” (Adichie, 2013, p. 313). Blaine gets angry because for an African American the white woman’s action is politically and racially loaded, and then proceeds to confront Ifemelu for letting that woman touch her hair. However, Ifemelu, as an African Immigrant, does not have the same history and culture as African Americans and therefore the white woman’s act does not affect her in the same way; she simply dismisses it as the natural curiosity of someone that might have never been around afro hair. The difference in their reactions to the white woman can be analyzed through Chude-Sokei’s argument that their different histories shape different “patterns of social response” (2014, p. 59). In reaction to Blaine’s frustration with her, the narrator states that “he expected her to feel what she did not know how to feel. There were things that existed for him that she could not penetrate” (Adichie, 2013, p. 313). While this tension is an ever-present issue in their relationship, there is a period of time where it disappears, as they bond together in their support of Barack Obama during the 2008 elections. In the words of the narrator, Ifemelu and Blaine were united by a “new passion, outside of themselves, that united them in an intimacy they had never had before, an unfixed, unspoken, intuitive intimacy: Barack Obama” (Adichie, 2013, p. 352). This bonding together makes sense considering the fact that Obama himself

serves as a link between African Immigrants and African Americans, given that he was born in the U.S. to an American mother, but his father, a diplomat, was born in Kenya.

Ultimately, however, Obama is not enough, and the tension of cultural difference and heritage puts an end to their relationship. Their last fight happens because Ifemelu chooses to go for lunch with Boubacar, a Senegalese academic, rather than go with Blaine to a protest in defense of an unjustly accused African American man. Arguably, her choice is symbolic of her political and emotional adhesion to her ethnic African identity above that of American blackness. As Blaine confronts her about her choice, she recognizes in his tone “a subtle accusation [...] about her Africanness; she was not sufficiently furious because she was African, not African American” (Adichie, 2013, p. 345). In her article about *Americanah*, Katherine Hallemeier frames Blaine’s attitudes towards Ifemelu’s politics as a result of his positioning within the black experience and black solidarity, which is limited to the constraints of what blackness means in the U.S.; as a consequence, he cannot function in a relationship in which “his advocacy for racial justice, does not result in the absolute solidarity he desires and expects” (Hallemeier, 2015, p. 240). The fact that they are ultimately incompatible reflects that cultural, political, and historical backgrounds interfere in personal relationships, confirming Cude-Sokei’s claim that the different history of the two African diasporas shapes their identity claims and politics (2014, p. 59).

Moreover, Adichie’s novel addresses the different histories of the two diasporas and the repercussion of such difference in the present beyond Ifemelu’s and Blaine’s relationship. There are repeated occasions in the novel where characters (especially white characters) portray African Immigrants as a ‘model minority’, setting them in contrast with African Americans. The rhetoric of the ‘model minority’ is a strategy used to show that, in the words of Violet M. Showers Johnson, “given the right group characteristics, Blacks did extremely well in America” (2013, p. 160), thus dismissing African Americans’ claims of systemic racial inequality. For instance, Laura refers as follows to a Ugandan woman she met in college: “She was wonderful, and she didn’t get along with the African American woman in our class at all. She didn’t have all those issues” (Adichie, 2013, p. 168). Rhetoric such as this is used to further victimize African Americans, for if black immigrants can succeed, its logic follows that systematic racism is not what keeps African Americans at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy. However, Ifemelu points out the ignorance behind Laura’s comment: “Maybe when the African American’s father was not allowed to vote because he was black, the Ugandan’s father was running for parliament or studying at Oxford” (2013, p. 168). Her



response efficiently summarizes the different heritages of African Americans and African Immigrants, establishing a direct relationship between having ‘all those issues’ (meaning anger at racial inequality) to a history of enslavement and segregation, of being deprived of basic civil rights.

Their different heritages also have a direct impact on how they perceive racism in the use of language, which is discussed in Ifemelu’s Honor’s history seminar at university. After watching several scenes from the film *Roots*, a Non-American student asks why the n-word was bleeped out (Adichie, 2013, p. 137). A class discussion follows, in which African American and non-American students of color differ on their perspective of the use of the word: while the first consider the word should never be used due to the pain it has caused and continues to cause, the latter acknowledge its historical meaning but find that “hiding it doesn’t make it go away” (2013, p. 138). Their discussion shows that racism and blackness are not monolithic and universal entities, and that their shape and meaning are context and history dependent. The crucial differing point in their histories brings the conversation to an end and creates an uncomfortable silence when an African American student claims: “Well, if you all hadn’t sold us, we wouldn’t be talking about any of this” (2013, p. 138). While the African student dismisses African participation in the slave trade, rightly placing responsibility on white European colonizers (“it was a European enterprise” (2013, p. 138)), the African American’s point remains as a looming reminder of historical guilt and the radical consequences of being on opposite sides of history – those who sold and those who were sold.

While *Americanah* uses discussions such as the one described to address the issue of historical heritage and guilt, the issue is not the novel’s main concern. Conversely, the main structural and symbolic strategies in *Homegoing* are used to tackle the issue of the radical differences and repercussions in the histories of voluntary and involuntary African diasporas that *Americanah* hints at. The novel’s structure into chapters that provide a window into the lives of the different generations in the two branches of the family, as well as its portrayal of inherited trauma, illustrate why African Immigrants “do not necessarily experience or respond to racism in the same way or share the same notions of identity or affiliation as African Americans” (Chude-Sokei, 2014, p. 55). Each generation is presented in pairs, and the differences between the experience of both branches in each generation read against each other.

The first radical split in their history takes place in the first two chapters through the experiences of sisters Effia and Esi: the first is married off to a British slave trader, while the

latter is captured and sold into slavery, kept in the very same castle where her sister lives. They experience radically different interactions with white men, which will affect the attitudes and fears of the following generations. While Effia's husband James has a 'real' white wife back in Europe, he is relatively kind and gentle with her: "he smiled when he spoke", "his hands were trembling" when he laid with her for the first time, and there was something about him that "soothed her" (Gyasi, 2016, p. 18). While her marriage is not enthusiastic it is not by force either, and the narrative makes a point of establishing that she has agency in their first sexual encounter: "She was the one who laid her body down. She was the one who lifted her skirt" (2016, p. 18). Conversely, Esi's experience is entirely different, as her agency is taken away the moment she is sold as a slave. The white men she encounters are anything but 'soothing', and her first impression of them is that "These people do not come from nature" (2016, p. 45). After being mistreated, insulted, and hurt by white soldiers, Esi finally receives what she perceives to be kindness from one of them: "he smiled, and for one quick second, she confused that act as one of kindness, for it had been so long since she'd seen someone smile" (2016, p. 47). However, what follows is sexual assault and rape, a scene that when set in contrast with Effia's sexual experience highlights the lack of agency in Esi's position: "he put her on a folded tarp, spread her legs, and entered her" (2016, p. 48). Thus, while Effia finds a relative consensus in her relationship with James, with whom she will have a son who will live with a relatively comfortable social status, Esi is brutally deprived of all agency, raped, and will have a daughter out of such violence, who will be born into slavery. Furthermore, it is not only the economic and social status that the children of both sisters inherit, as Esi's trauma shall be passed down from generation to generation in different shapes. She will permanently remember the smile of the man who raped her, and as a consequence, she will never smile herself, which is passed down to her daughter Ness. Born a slave, Ness "would always associate real love with a hardness of spirit" (2016, p. 71), as her mother's trauma made her incapable of expressing love or joy. Moreover, the violence that Esi suffers marks a loss of cultural heritage, as she leaves their traditional stories behind, and Ness learned stories of the Middle Passage instead of the stories passed down from generation to generation in her mother's original Asante tribe (2016, p. 70).

As Lisa Ze Winters writes in her essay "Fiction and Slavery's Archive: Memory, Agency, and Finding Home", "the characters in Gyasi's novel persistently navigate the never-ending reverberations of their diasporic beginnings" (2018, p. 340). That is, the dissonance between the lived experience of the two sisters has repercussions in the generations to follow,

which will inherit transgenerational trauma. Effia's branch is marked by the transmission of cultural knowledge and the conflict between the Fante and Asante tribes, which is encouraged by British colonizers because the endless wars provide bodies for the slave traffic. Conversely, Esi's descendants are born in North America: Ness is born into slavery and manages to get her infant son Kojo out of the system. However, while he grows up to be free and form a family, the blood line is forced back into slavery as his pregnant wife Anna is taken into slavery with the excuse of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Their son H is born in slavery and becomes free at age 13 when the Civil War ends, only to be trapped into prison labor, the new form of slavery. His daughter Willie shall experience racial segregation and Jim Crow in New York, confined to the limits of Harlem and abandoned by her white-passing husband. Her son Sonny will perpetuate the cycle of abandonment, having three children with three different women he ignores; he will be a victim of extreme economic inequality, police brutality, and heroin. Therefore, the novel's structure into chapters generation through generation make a point of portraying the evolution of racial violence in the U.S. ever since its foundation, spanning from the beginnings of slavery, to the prison system, to Jim Crow, police brutality, poverty, and drug addiction.

As a consequence, not only social status and skin tone are passed down generation to generation, but also the knowledge of trauma, which is still present in Marcus, a present-day African American. While he is on his way to success, working on his PhD, traces of his family's past still linger within him. On the one hand, the first time he sees the ocean he finds that "it had made his stomach turn [...] it terrified him" (Gyasi, 2016, p. 284) – this fear is a direct consequence of the fact that black people were brought into slavery through that very ocean, and as his father points out: "What did a black man want to swim for? The ocean floor was already littered with black men" (2016, p. 284). Moreover, another 'irrational' fear captures him when as a child he gets lost in a museum and runs into an old white man who is carrying a cane:

Marcus had felt as though at any moment the man would lift the cane all the way up toward the ceiling and send it crashing over his head. He couldn't guess why he felt that way, but it had scared him so badly, he could start to feel a wet stream traveling down his pant legs (Gyasi, 2016, p. 288-289).

Marcus' intense fear of the white man and his cane reads as an inherited fear of the white violence that his family had been experiencing generation through generation, which even as a

small child he feels instinctively. On the other hand, he also inherits a lack of roots and origin, a loss he copes with by fantasizing about a different reality, imagining “a different room, a fuller family [...] Sometimes in a hut in Africa [...] he would want so badly for all the people he made up in his head to be there in that room, with him” (Gyasi, 2016, p. 290).

The loss of roots and heritage experienced by Marcus’ branch of the family bloodline is further emphasized symbolically, through a necklace that is passed down from generation to generation, which is filled with meaning and leads to a cathartic end, pointing towards conciliation. Although they never knew they were sisters, both Esi and Effia inherited two identical necklaces from their mother, which Effia’s stepmother refers to as “a piece of your mother” (Gyasi, 2016, p. 16). However, while Effia and her descendants are able to pass down the necklace, until it makes its way to Marjorie’s hands, Esi’s necklace is left behind in the slave holding prison cell where she was kept before being taken to America. The two sisters’ experiences have repercussions through time and into the present, and as a result, while Marcus longs for heritage, and imagines a fictional African family, Marjorie has her necklace as a link to her family’s past: “It had belonged Old Lady and to Abena before her, and to James, and Quey, and Effia the Beauty before that [...] Her father had told her that the necklace was a part of their family history and that she was to never take it off, never give it away” (Gyasi, 2016, p. 267). Thus, while Marjorie, as a daughter of African Immigrants, does not feel fully comfortable within American racial dynamics and feels like a foreigner when she visits Ghana, at the very least she has roots, she knows where she comes from and who her family has been. Conversely, Marcus’ ancestry has been irredeemably lost along with the family necklace.

The novel’s concern with the issue of ancestry and inheritance situates the novel firmly within Ato Quayson’s description of one of the main characteristics of diasporic literature, “genealogical accounting”, which “involves questions of ancestry, ethnicity, tradition, and culture” and “produces a nexus of affiliations such that the fate of one person is seen to be inextricably tied to the fate of all others” (2019, pp. 146-147). Genealogical accounting is perhaps the main theme of Gyasi’s novel, which emphasizes the importance of heritage and subdues identity and agency to the time of past and present. Moreover, Quayson argues: “The genealogical accounting may sometimes be articulated in the form of quest motif, where discovery is meant to restore the diasporic to a form of epistemological certainty about their identity” (2019, pp. 147-148). Such a quest is undertaken by Marjorie and Marcus, although its conclusion is spiritual or emotional rather than factual certainty. The novel’s ending suggests that although the loss and pain of the past are immense and unforgivable, some healing

can be found through the coming together of African Immigrants and African Americans. Marjorie and Marcus meet in the U.S. by chance, they become friends unaware of their shared bloodline, and the encounter provokes in Marcus a comforting feeling of “being found [...] Like she had, somehow, found him” (Gyasi, 2016, p. 293). The catharsis of their mutually healing relationship comes at the very end, when they take a trip together to Ghana, where it all started, and unbeknownst to them, visit the very cell where their ancestor Esi was imprisoned before she was taken to America. Marcus feels an instinctive panic and runs through the door the slaves would have been forced through, making his way to the beach. Marjorie follows him, and they encounter both their worst fears: a fear of fire has been passed down through Marjorie’s branch of the family, and a fear of water through Marcus. An act of symbolic historical healing takes place as they both help each other overcome their fears by going to each other. Marjorie makes her way to Marcus, who is standing next to a bon fire, and then Marcus goes to Marjorie, who has gotten into the ocean, and once he reaches her, she gives him her family necklace and says: “Welcome home” (Gyasi, 2016, p. 300). The novel’s hopeful ending is charged with historical weight – Marcus thinks of his ancestors as “products of their time”, and of himself as “an accumulation of these times” (Gyasi, 2016, p. 296). Once he has the necklace on, which is symbolically charged with ancestry and tradition, he is “surprised by its weight” (Gyasi, 2016, p. 300). In both cases, such phrasing emphasizes the weight of historical circumstances over individual will or agency, in a novel in which the characters’ actions “are reactive in ways that underscore the characters’ passivity in the face of their circumstances” (Ze Winters, 2018, 340). This historical importance is released as they both get into the ocean, which Marcus looks at as “the vast expanse of time and space” (Gyasi, 2016, p. 300), which they re-appropriate as a space of healing and safety, as they make their way back to the shore.

Conciliation is ultimately impossible in *Americanah*, and although Ifemelu has built a successful professional life in the United States, she feels the need to return to Nigeria, which “became where she was supposed to be” (Adichie, 2013, p. 6). When she is back in Nigeria, Ifemelu tells Obinze that “the thing about cross-cultural relationships is that you spend so much time explaining. My ex-boyfriends and I spent a lot of time explaining” (2013, p. 457). Thus, for Ifemelu, this ‘explaining’ stands in the way of real connections, and in the end the novel opts for a return to the familiar, away from the constraining realities of race in America. Conversely, *Homegoing* portrays the encounter of the two African diasporas as an occasion for healing rather than tension. The novel does not shy away from the complexity of their histories,

but it also refuses to submit to the tension of history. Rather, the narrative suggests the possibilities for hope, connection, and conciliation to be found in coming together.

### 3. WHITE FRAGILITY

#### 3.1. Whiteness studies, white privilege, and the assumption of neutrality

The field of ‘whiteness studies’ investigates the systemic and psychological workings of white privilege. While this raises the valid concern that directing attention to white people in studies of racism risks centering whiteness at the expense of marginalized people, these studies shed a light on how systemic racism works and how it sustains itself. By analyzing white behavior in racial terms, they also subvert the commonplace habit of seeing white people as racially neutral and people of color as racially marked. Furthermore, several African American scholars and writers have asked for a closer look at whiteness. For example, in his autobiography *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote “The Souls of White Folk” (1920), commenting on the nature of the racial hatred of white people, which has inspired in part the subsequent research undertaken in ‘whiteness studies’. Moreover, in her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison discusses the Africanist presence in the works of white authors belonging to the American literary canon and claims that “the pattern of thinking about racialism in terms of its consequences on the victim [...] should be joined with another, equally important: the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it” (1992, p. 11). Appealing to Morrison’s claim that it is important to “see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters” (1998, p. 12), this part of the project looks at how Adichie and Gyasi portray whiteness. and their main characters’ encounters with white fragility. This analysis will be mainly based on Robin Diangelo’s book *White Fragility: Why it’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, although other theoretical works will be referenced as well. This section of the analysis aims to apply theory on the construction of whiteness to Adichie’s and Gyasi’s novels.

Diangelo defines ‘white fragility’ as the reaction of white people to conversations about race, which trigger defensive responses. These responses “reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge”, they are born out of superiority and entitlement, and they manifest themselves in vastly different ways, from anger or fear to silence or withdrawal (Diangelo, 2018, p. 2). She goes on to provide a highly insightful analysis of how white supremacy works and sustains itself through white fragility and “the unexamined beliefs that prop up our racial responses” (2018, pp. 3-4). These ‘unexamined beliefs’ are grounded in the understanding of racism as an individual and anecdotic phenomenon rather than a systematic and

institutionalized structure, as well as in the fact that we are taught to see whiteness as neutral, and ourselves as “outside or innocent of race – just human” (Diangelo, 2018, p. 27).

This assumption of neutrality is brilliantly represented in *Americanah* through a white woman Ifemelu meets at the hair salon, Kelsey, who talks to her about African literature. She tells Ifemelu that she found *A Bend in the River* to be “the most honest book [she’s] read about Africa” (2013, p. 190). When Ifemelu disagrees, explaining that to her the novel is not about Africa but about Europe, the following exchange happens: “‘Oh, well, I see why you would read it like that’ ‘And I see why *you* would read it like you did’, Ifemelu said” (2013, p. 190). The ‘*you*’ in Ifemelu’s response is in italics in the original, in order to give emphasis to the fact that Ifemelu is pointing out Kelsey’s assumption of her own objectivity, her perhaps unconscious belief that she is an impartial reader whereas Ifemelu is a subjective one. The novel makes this explicit in Ifemelu’s definition of Kelsey as “this girl who somehow believed that she was miraculously neutral in how she read books, while other people read emotionally” (2013, p. 190). Furthermore, Kelsey’s reaction to Ifemelu’s comment is an example of Diangelo’s understanding of white fragility: “she raised her eyebrows, as though Ifemelu was one of those slightly unbalanced people who were best avoided” (2013, p. 190). That is, when confronted with her own racial bias, the white woman withdraws from the conversation by dismissing Ifemelu and the validity of her comment. Shane A. McCoy refers to Kelsey as the “quintessential liberal American stereotype – enlightened, well-travelled, and a desire to participate in the ‘exotic’ and unfamiliar” (2017, p. 285). She is a white liberal who does not think of herself as racist and who is supposed to have good intentions, as she tries to communicate to the black women at the salon: Ifemelu describes her as being “aggressively friendly” (2013, p. 189). However, she is condescending to the hairdresser, refuses to take Ifemelu seriously once she contradicts her, and the entire situation is taking place because she has entered a space for black women and is appropriating their culture by getting cornrows done. The scene reads as a satire of white progressives, further ridiculed by Ifemelu’s description of her cornrows as “seven cornrows, the too-fine hair already slackening in the plaits” (2013, p. 191), which suggests that the hair-style is ill-fitting. Kelsey is of course unaware of this, and responds “It’s great!” when she sees them (2013, p. 191). This obliviousness to how precarious the hairstyle looks on her is a reflection of her obliviousness to her own racism, which is one of the pillars of the sustainment of white supremacy. Her behavior is an example of what Diangelo calls ‘aversive racism’: the racism exerted by allegedly well-intentioned people, which “exists under the surface of consciousness because it



conflicts with consciously held beliefs of racial equality and justice” (2018, p. 43). That is, Kelsey *is* racist, but her unawareness of her own racism allows her to maintain a positive self-image and keeps her from unlearning it.

It is important to remark that this obliviousness is not innocent and should not be addressed as such, given that white people are psychologically and materially invested in not questioning their privilege. In her pioneering article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”, Peggy McIntosh describes white privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack” (1989, p. 10). Thus, every single white person benefits from white supremacy and systematic racism, and white fragility serves as a defense mechanism to keep such privileges intact. In McIntosh’s words, “Describing white privilege makes one newly accountable” (1989, p. 10), for the system is sustained by not acknowledging the problem and reducing racism to individual acts committed by individual ‘bad’ people. In sum, “obliviousness about white advantage [...] serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already” (1989, p. 12).

### **3.2. White guilt or white women’s tears**

The phrase ‘white tears’ refers to the ways in which “white fragility manifests itself through white people’s laments over how hard racism is on *us*” (Diangelo, 2018, p. 131). Diangelo addresses ‘white women’s tears’ in terms of the particular fragility of white women when confronted with racially uncomfortable situations or with the tangible results of racism. This discomfort also includes guilt for their own participation in the system of white supremacy, and it is portrayed in both *Americanah* and *Homegoing* in different degrees. While in Adichie’s novel it is shown through a modern day liberal, white, middle class woman, in Gyasi’s novel it appears through the wife of a slaveholder. A modern white reader would be appalled by the latter, but might empathize with the first, given that it is common contemporary behavior for white progressives. Thus, setting them in contrast as two different points in a continuity of systematic racism throughout the centuries of U.S. history sheds a light on the historical legacy of contemporary behaviors, which might be more subtle, but are still charged with underlying white supremacy and privilege.

Chapter 4 of *Homegoing* is focused on Ness, Esi’s daughter, who was born a slave and is the first generation of the family line to be born in the U.S. She spends her entire life being sold from plantation to plantation, and the chapter describes a period of her life in which she

has been sold to “Thomas Allan Stockham’s Alabama plantation” (Gyasi, 2016, p. 70). Due to her beauty and youth, her master’s initial intentions are to make her a house slave rather than a field one, and she is instructed to put on a uniform which is somewhat revealing, and shows part of her scars. Margaret, a fellow slave, sees her scars and warns her master: “she ain’t fit for da house” because “it ain’t something you gon’ want to see” (2016, p. 73). However, the master insists, and Ness shows herself to him and his wife, who in seeing her, “fainted outright” (2016, p. 73). Ness’ scars are a visual consequence of the pain and torture she has endured under the system of slavery, and the visibility of her pain makes her unfit to work in the house. As a consequence, she will have to do the rougher work in the fields instead, away from sight, in order to protect white sensibility. Thus, a white woman who directly benefits from the system of slavery, whose house is ran by slaves, cannot bear to look at the direct consequences of such system and must be shielded from them. Her fainting can be interpreted through Diangelo’s argument that “anti-blackness comes from deep guilt”, and it is caused by “the unbearable knowledge of our own complicity with the profound torture of black people” (2018, p. 94). Her fainting is a manifestation of that deep guilt caused by her being exposed to the material reality of the torture of black people that sustains her lifestyle: seeing Ness’ scars makes the ‘unbearable knowledge’ of the reality of slavery unescapable. Moreover, the husband’s response is to scream at Margaret to take Ness away from sight, which reflects how when white people are exposed to racial discomfort, it is black people who are blamed. While they are the ones suffering the actual physical torture, it becomes their responsibility to remove themselves from the situation so that whites can go back to burying the trauma of guilt. Thus, black people are not only the victims of systematic racist violence, but the responsibility to make everyone else feel comfortable and shielded from such violence is placed on them as well. White guilt is also present in the husband himself: he never whips his slaves in public, he does it “in private, somewhere he could close his eyes during” (Gyasi, 2016, p. 82). His need to remove the violence he inflicts from both public and private sight implies that he is haunted by deep shame and guilt caused by the knowledge of the horrifying reality he is perpetuating. However, his way of coping with this knowledge is to bury it, to remove it from sight, so that he can continue to inflict the violence and benefit from its economic rewards. This retreat from racial discomfort, manifested in both the woman’s fainting and the man’s shutting his eyes, are extreme examples of how white people shut down and retreat from racial discomfort, which allows them to keep on functioning and participating in the system of white supremacy, reaping the privileges that their whiteness affords them. Furthermore, the neurotic behavior of both

husband and wife reflects Fanon's claim that "the white man, slave to his superiority, behave[s] along neurotic lines" (2008, p. 42).

*Americanah* shows how these attitudes have evolved into present day behaviors that protect white people from racial discomfort by placing the responsibility of dealing with racial discomfort on black people, thus allowing them to leave their own racism unchallenged, as well as the racism of other white people. A perfect example is Kimberly, a white middle-class woman who thinks of herself as progressive. Ifemelu is her babysitter and they get along well, but Kimberly's discomfort with race issues stands in the way of them having a real connection, as Ifemelu sees her as someone fragile whom she needs to protect. For example, after having a racist encounter with the carpet cleaner, Ifemelu wants to share her experience with Kimberly, but decides not to, fearing her reaction: she "might become flustered and apologize for what was not her fault [...] it was discomfiting to observe how Kimberly lurched, keen to do the right thing but not knowing what the right thing was" (2013, p. 166). Kimberly is sincerely well intentioned, but her own white fragility stands in the way of her actually engaging in positive change. The fact that her reactions to racially charged situations are to become flustered, lurch, and excessively apologize, shows that she is unable to move past her own guilt for participating in the system. In Diangelo's words, "tears that are driven by white guilt are self-indulgent [...] guilt functions as an excuse for inaction" (2018, p. 135): Kimberly feels bad but is unable to do anything proactive. Furthermore, her expressions of guilt make Ifemelu uncomfortable, who then feels the need to shield Kimberly from being exposed to the ways in which Ifemelu experiences racism. The unhealthy racial dynamic between Kimberly and Ifemelu becomes most explicit when Kimberly's sister Laura visits, as she constantly makes racist and condescending remarks in front of Ifemelu. On one occasion, after making some uneducated and racist remarks about how African immigrants "don't have all those issues" that African Americans do, Ifemelu contradicts her pointing out their different history, which offends Laura (2013, p. 168). Once Laura leaves, Ifemelu observes Kimberly's discomfort at having upset her sister: she "could almost hear Kimberly's heart beating wildly" (2013, p. 168), and she not only apologizes to Kimberly, but also rushes to find Laura and apologizes to her as well. Therefore, Kimberly's white fragility leads Ifemelu to feeling so bad for her that she places her boss' feelings above her own anger regarding Laura's racist comments; exemplifying how the protection of white comfort is still prioritized above the actual harmful consequences of racism on those who suffer it.

### 3.3. Whiteness, Love, and Desire

Robin Diangelo claims that one of the main results of white fragility, apart from its role in sustaining the existing racial hierarchy, is that it “limits white people’s ability to form authentic connections across racial lines and perpetuates a cycle that keeps racism in place” (2018, p. 111). That is, the fact that white people choose to “retreat from the discomfort of authentic racial engagement” (Diangelo, 2018, p. 111) serves as a barrier that makes trust and true emotional connections impossible. Interestingly, this impossibility of connection is portrayed in both *Americanah* and *Homegoing*, given that Ifemelu and Marjorie both engage in romantic relationships with white men which are ultimately doomed to failure. The relationships fail due to both internal and external issues; that is, the white men’s incapacity to honestly address racial disparity, and the racial realities of the outside world, which have an impact on the relationship.

The intrusion of political privilege into personal relationships is explicitly addressed by Ifemelu in *Americanah* during a dinner with her white boyfriend Curt’s liberal friends. After a Haitian woman claims that she dated a white man for a long period of time and “race was never an issue for them” (Adichie, 2013, p. 290), Ifemelu disagrees:

When you are black in America and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn’t matter when you’re alone together because it’s just you and your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters. But we don’t talk about it. We don’t even tell our white partners the small things that piss us off and the things we wish they understood better, because we’re worried they will say we’re overreacting, or we’re being too sensitive. (2013, p. 290-291)

Hallemeier frames Ifemelu’s relationships with both Curt and Blaine as “allegories for understanding ‘the question’ of race in the United States”, which expose how the ‘private’ sphere is affected by politics and “the stifling effects of American certitudes that are experienced and understood as private, despite having been profoundly shaped by a long shared history of white supremacy” (2015, p. 240). Ifemelu’s rebuttal to the Haitian woman asserts the intervention of systems of racial inequality within personal relationships, particularly interracial relationships. While she claims that race only intervenes in the relationship when it is exposed to the outside world, “when you step outside”, her stating that “we don’t even tell our white partners” in fear of being perceived as “overreacting” or “too sensitive” (Adichie, 2013, p. 291) reflects that the partner’s own privilege within the relationship also affects their

dynamic and supposes an obstacle for real connection. In fact, race plays an inescapable role all throughout her relationship with Curt, and while it mostly comes in the form of discussions about external inputs, Curt's reactions make it clear that his white privilege gets in the way of his ability to connect with and understand Ifemelu. For instance, her major frustration is that while he is aware that racial inequality exists in the U.S., "she did not understand how he grasped one thing but was completely tone-deaf about another similar thing" (Adichie, 2013, p. 291). That is, Curt is able to detect the racism of some situations but not of others. For example, he gets furious when an Asian woman who works in a spa refuses to wax Ifemelu's eyebrows claiming that "we don't do curly" (2013, p. 292). When Curt finds out, he takes her back to the spa and yells at the Asian woman, who finally agrees to do Ifemelu's eyebrows. At this point, Ifemelu is not comfortable with the situation and would have rather just move on, but "Curt was too outraged on her behalf", so she puts herself through the tense situation of having the woman wax her eyebrows (2013, p. 292). While in this case Curt chose to act in behalf of Ifemelu, taking her experience as a personal affront to his own person and disregarding whether she was comfortable addressing the situation or not; in cases where he does not perceive the issue as racist, he also disregards Ifemelu's perspective on it. This is the case of numerous scenes in the novel, such as when Ifemelu meets Curt's aunt, who excessively asserts her interest for African people. When Ifemelu expresses her discomfort to Curt, saying that "[she doesn't] need her to over-assure [her] that she likes black people", Curt merely states that "it was not about race" (2013, p. 293). At this point Ifemelu is frustrated that "There were, simply, times that he saw and times that he was unable to see" (2013, p. 294). On top of the stress of racial situations, sharing her thoughts with Curt would mean having to endure his skepticism and lack of support when *he* does not consider the situation to be 'about race'. In Diangelo's words, one of the privileges of whiteness is that "whites invoke the power to choose when, how, and to what extent racism is addressed or challenged" (2018, p. 109). The fact that in these cases Ifemelu "chose silence" (Adichie, 2013, p. 294) reflects Diangelo's claim that when a black person does not talk to a white person about racism, "this silence is one of the ways that racism is manifest, for it is an imposed silence [...] this absence of conversation may indicate a lack of cross-racial trust" (2018, p. 81). Therefore, it is not only the racism of the world around them that ultimately makes the relationship impossible: it is Curt's own privilege and blindness to his privilege, as well as his unwillingness to understand and listen to Ifemelu's lived experiences.

Furthermore, Curt's lack of self-awareness finally comes out in the form of verbal aggression when Ifemelu breaks up with him. Tim Wise, a white anti-racist writer and activist, wrote about the 'pathology of privilege', which causes white people to be less self-aware than people of color because "to be the dominant group is to have that luxury, or think you do, of not having to care what other people think", whereas "to be a person of color in this country is to always have to know what the other guy thinks" as a method for self-protection (2008, p. 14). Indeed, Curt is unaware of the problems that his privilege causes in their relationship, and in discovering that Ifemelu has slept with someone else out of her unhappiness with their relationship, he places all the responsibility on her: "How could you do this to me? I was so good to you." (Adichie, 2013, p. 289). This reaction shows that even at the very end of their relationship, Curt is still completely unaware of the discomfort that his unchecked privileges have caused for Ifemelu. Furthermore, all his niceties disappear as in the face of rejection he becomes cold and calls her "Bitch" (2013, p. 289). Ultimately, Adichie uses the dynamics of their romantic relationship to shed a light on the ways in which privilege gets in the way of true and honest connections, and their relationship "exposes the intersections of race and class as they operate in the United States by illuminating [Curt's] wealth and privilege and her lack of them" (Bragg, 2017, p. 134).

Likewise, in *Homegoing* Marjorie dates a white German boy, Graham, but their relationship is ultimately doomed to failure and real connection is made impossible in part because of his white privilege. Although they bond over their positions as outsiders, as they are both immigrants, their migrant experiences and subsequent identifications are very different. Marjorie notices that difference in the fact that "He didn't wear the country on his sleeve the same way she wore Ghana on hers" (Gyasi, 2016, p. 277). Graham does not need to cling to his cultural identity in the same way that Marjorie does, because in his arrival to America his whiteness has not been imposed on him as his most salient identity. Conversely, as discussed in the section on African Immigrants and African Americans, Marjorie has had to defend her ethnicity and her cultural identity over the imposition of blackness as an all-encompassing identity. Such a difference in their experiences of migration is representative of the privileges that whiteness affords even to those who are considered foreigners, to whom white solidarity is extended regardless of their country of origin. Diangelo refers to white solidarity as "the unspoken agreement among whites to protect white advantage and not cause another white person to feel racial discomfort" (2018, p. 57). This "white racial bonding" (Diangelo, 2018, p. 57) through which white people protect each other's privileges, appears in

*Homegoing* and gets in between Graham and Marjorie's relationship. Its main portrayal takes place in school, when Graham sits next to Marjorie at lunch time and a white girl approaches him. In noticing his interest for Marjorie, she advises him: "You shouldn't sit here. People will start to think... Well, you know" (Gyasi, 2016, p. 279). Instead, she invites him to "come sit with us" (2016, p. 279), the 'us' suggesting an invitation to retreat back to the safety of white company. The girl's interruption implies that Graham has broken the 'unspoken agreement to protect white advantage' by fraternizing and sitting with Marjorie, a black girl. In bringing him back to the other white people, she is protecting both Graham's privilege – (so that people do not "start to think... Well, you know" (Gyasi, 2016, p.279)) and the white group's privileges in general, for they only exist as long as black subjects are kept separate and underprivileged. Graham chooses to welcome this act of white solidarity, and when Marjorie says "Go, it's fine." (2016, p. 279), hoping that he would fight and stay with her, "He got up, looking almost relieved" (2016, p. 279). As he leaves with the white girl, Marjorie "saw how easy it was for him to slip unnoticed, as though he had always belong there" (Gyasi, 2016, p. 280). Thus, although their shared migrant experiences served as a source of bonding at a certain point, skin color and race are the ultimate differentials: they are both immigrants, but Graham is white, and his whiteness affords him the option to blend into white solidarity, leaving Marjorie behind.

Their relationship does not have much future after that. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K Bhabha writes: "It is precisely in that ambivalent use of 'different' - to be differentiated from those that are different makes you the same – that the Unconscious speaks of the form of otherness, the tethered shadow of deferral and displacement" (2004, p. 64). It is this notion of difference that is the last straw for Marjorie's faith in her relationship with Graham when he uses the argument that she was "not like other black girls" (Gyasi, 2016, p. 280) to try and convince the principal of their school to let them attend prom together. For Marjorie, "somehow, that had been worse" (Gyasi, 2016, p. 280). Graham had not addressed their different skin colors until this point, only their cultural differences given that they were both from different countries. When he eventually does, he insensitively argues that her 'difference' from other black girls should afford her different treatment, thus suggesting that she was special *in spite* of her skin color, which is all she shared with the other girls. Thus, both his unwillingness to give up his white privileges by standing up to an environment that is hostile to their relationship, and his own unawareness of racism stand in the way of a possibly meaningful connection. In this sense, both novels confirm Diangelo's argument by portraying

how white privilege turned white fragility, and the unawareness that comes along with it, ultimately serve as obstacles to the possibility of real connections across racial lines.



## 4. CONCLUSIONS

As postcolonial diasporic literature, *Americanah* and *Homegoing* prove insightful in their rich portrayals of history, identity, gender, and race. Due to the extension of this project, a choice has been made to confine this analysis to three main issues: interpellation into the performance of Blackness, the conflicting identities of African Immigrants and African Americans, and the sustainment of systematic racism through white fragility, all within the context of the United States. Both novels prove that the experiences and perspectives of outsiders make visible the unconscious processes through which racial identification is imposed and privileges maintained, ensuring the reproduction of the material consequences of racial inequality.

Reading Adichie's and Gyasi's novels together or against each other provides a fuller picture of the vast background of colonization, slavery, and diaspora that constitute present-day notions of race and privilege. This project has aimed to apply theory on race and diaspora in order to prove that the two novels share an interest in these themes and offer unique insights on American racial issues through the perspective of the postcolonial and diasporic 'Other'. While the U.S. is rarely addressed through the lenses of postcolonial theory, the novels prove that the theory of famous postcolonial theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha or Frantz Fanon are perfectly appropriate tools for analyzing the interpellation and performance of race in the United States. Furthermore, *Americanah* and *Homegoing* both showcase how the entrance of African Immigrants into American society distorts and expands American notions of blackness, problematizing the assumed neutrality of the American perception of race or skin color as an individual's most salient and relevant identity. While the two novels' engagement with the issue of the two African diasporas differ in their conclusion, they also enrich each other, providing background and different perspectives; which leads to the conclusion that there is no one monolithic answer or conclusion to the issue.

Lastly, by addressing the portrayal of white characters and their fragility in Adichie's and Gyasi's novels, this paper aims to show that whiteness criticism is a productive angle from which to question the perpetuation of racial dynamics by presumably well-intentioned white liberals. Thus, this project defends the importance of the continuing development of the whiteness studies field, which undertakes the crucial work of questioning assumptions of white neutrality and dissecting the construction of white privilege and identity in order to learn how to dismantle them and their role in sustaining white supremacy.

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